

MARTIN LUTHER AS A CREATIVE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

HEINZ BLUHM

Boston College

Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts 02167

When the young Augustinian monk Martin Luther succeeded Johann von Staupitz as holder of the *Lectura in Biblia* in the University of Wittenberg in 1512, probably no one, not even the vicar-general himself, suspected that the new appointee, promising enough to be sure, was to become one of the most revolutionary figures in the entire history of biblical studies. It is sometimes forgotten that Martin Luther, in addition to being the recognized leader of the Protestant Reformation, was for well over thirty years the most distinguished professor of the university which he, more than any single faculty member, helped put on the European map.

In a way, one may go so far as to say that no matter how important a role he played as the chief Reformer, Luther's first task and achievement lay in the field of the Bible. In fact, one may even hold that whatsoever he did—and his is one of the most illustrious names in European history—stemmed ultimately from his understanding of Holy Writ. What this man had thought out in his cell and presented in the lecture room to his students was destined to shake Europe to its foundations. Yet it should ever be borne in mind that the deeds he wrought emanated from the thoughts he thought, and that these had their origin in, and were inextricably interwoven with, the Bible as he read and taught it.

Luther's work on the Bible was of a twofold nature: exegesis and translation. Although the present essay will deal primarily with Luther as a Bible translator, a very brief overview of his exegetical work will be given first, in order to provide context for his significant role in providing a magnificent German translation of Scripture—a version whose impact on his own time and on all succeeding generations is virtually immeasurable.

1. *Luther as an Exegete*

Luther's work as an exegete antedated by several years, of course, his efforts as a translator. We may fully ignore his early

philosophical and theological annotations from 1508 on, the preserved records of which are disappointingly scanty and which are, in accordance with medieval custom, theological rather than strictly biblical anyway. This exclusion allows us to set down the month of August, 1513, as the actual beginning of his formal university lectures on the Bible, with the informal preparation for them probably commencing either late in 1512 or early in 1513. From 1513 until his death he lectured and wrote on the Bible, his regular classes interrupted only by necessary absences from Wittenberg, war, plague, and personal illness.

It is not my intention in this brief article to enumerate all the books of the Bible he took up in the many years of his professorial activity. Suffice it to say here that his favorite books, on some of which he lectured more than once, were the Psalms and the chief Pauline Epistles. What interests us primarily is the nature of his exegesis and the general spirit of the lectures.

It is not easy to make up one's mind on Luther the exegete. He is at once conservative and radical. The impression one soon gets is that his exegesis faces in two directions, toward the Middle Ages and toward the modern world. The real problem is to decide which is the more important aspect of his work. By and large, it would seem that the medieval approach far outweighs whatever there is of modernity in Luther's exegesis. To begin with, his exegesis is unhistorical, just as practically all of medieval exegesis had been. It does not, in this respect, attain the heights reached by that remarkable thirteenth-century Judaeo-Christian, the Franciscan friar Nicolaus de Lyra.

Still, after the worst has been said about the lack of historical approach in Luther's exegesis from 1513 to 1546, it is very important not to identify it completely with the prevailing medieval method, but to recognize the basic difference. Although this is one of degree only and not really of kind, it is nevertheless of major significance.

What Luther has in common with the traditional exegesis of the Middle Ages is its emphasis throughout the Bible on Christ. He differs from it, not by breaking this magic circle of the medieval mind, but by intensifying the stress on Christ to the exclusion of everything else, by making the entire Bible utterly and completely Christo-centric. In other words, Luther, like the exegetes in the

centuries before him, reads an interpretation *into* the Bible. Instead of exegesis, it is eisegesis; instead of "Auslegen," it is "Einlegen."

The difference between Luther and the preceding Christian exegesis of more than a thousand years is the difference between the fundamental spirit of medieval Christianity and Luther's personal and individual version of the Christian religion. It is, in brief, the distinction between what Christianity had become since the days of Paul and what Luther made of it again in the footsteps of Paul. The religion of *fides et opera* makes way for the religion of *sola fides et gratia*. This basic religious distinction makes itself felt in the very exegesis itself and permeates it completely. While this change is, of course, an intra-Christian affair, it is nonetheless marked and profound and must never be lost sight of.

In order to avoid a possible misunderstanding, it must be constantly borne in mind that although Luther's exegesis is generally unhistorical, as indicated above, it is nevertheless in some ways and places quite historical. Indeed, it is rather more so than that of his medieval predecessors. His interpretation of key passages of the Pauline Epistles is extraordinary. It is no exaggeration to say that his understanding of the heart of Paul's theology is probably matchless: Certainly it is much more adequate than that of any Christian exegete before him. One may safely speak of genuinely historical exegesis when one thinks of the quintessence of the religion of the Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians.

If Luther's understanding of Paul rises far above that of his predecessors and contemporaries and penetrates to the very core of Paul's fundamental thought, however, his interpretation of the non-Pauline parts of the Bible is anything but historical. In these places it is, with respect to a historical point of view, "inferior" to that of, say, Nicolaus de Lyra, mentioned above.

The general exegesis of the ancient and medieval church had strayed from the strictly historical meaning of the Bible, primarily, of course, of the OT. It had permeated the text with Christian views, reading Christ into every verse so far as possible. The only difference between Luther and medieval exegetes is that he read his all-Pauline conception of Christ into the *whole* Bible. We may readily and justly say that whatever is genuinely Pauline in the Bible is fully understood by Luther, usually inadequately by pre-Lutherans; whatever is non-Pauline in the Bible becomes by force

Pauline in Luther's exegesis, while remaining non-Pauline in extra-Lutheran interpretation.

It short, it can be held that Luther actually gave us a new Bible in that he consistently elevated the Scriptures as a whole to the giddy heights of his own profound understanding of the Christian religion. The pre-Lutheran interpretation had begun this arduous task, Luther carried it to completion. His work was done superbly well, coming as it did at the end of an entire epoch of biblical exegesis.

2. Luther's Translation: Some General Observations

After this cursory sketch of the role Luther played in the history of biblical exegesis, we are ready to embark on a discussion of his place in the history of the translation of the Bible in the Western world. This is a formidable assignment and has never, so far as I know, been essayed seriously. It will not be possible, in this brief survey, to do more than suggest certain lines of thought along which this intricate and provoking problem may some day be solved.

Let it be said at the outset that Luther himself, at times justifiably proud of his total achievement, had very definite ideas on the position of his German Bible in the history of biblical translations in the West. He was convinced, and said so more than once, that his translation of the Bible was by and large the best rendering of the Bible into any language known to him up to his time. Inasmuch as there were as yet no printed Bibles done into modern languages other than German (except for the Dutch Delft Bible of 1477 and a French version published in multiple editions beginning in 1487), Luther, when he made this proud statement, must necessarily have had in mind the Vulgate and the medieval German Bibles, both High and Low German, and perhaps also the Septuagint (LXX) for the OT.

Since the pre-Lutheran German Bibles can be eliminated almost categorically as serious competitors (and certainly the Dutch and French Bibles can be eliminated), it is really only the Latin Vulgate and, possibly, the Greek LXX that remain as worthy rivals. There can really be little doubt that the translation he had principally in mind was the Vulgate; the LXX probably played only a secondary role at best in the Western world (certainly so up to the sixteenth century). It was thus in all likelihood chiefly the Vulgate,

the translation used by the international medieval church, to which Luther claimed superiority after his German Bible had been completed and even while it was in the making. Let us examine this claim.

It is important, first of all, to be fair to the Vulgate. While there are mistakes in it, it should always be remembered that it is on the whole a faithful and responsible version. Scholars agree that it does not express the great variety of individual styles of the original. There can be little doubt that it presents a far less diversified picture than the Hebrew and Greek materials do. Christ—that is, the Christ of the church of Rome—is the unifying element in the Vulgate as a whole. Besides the undefinable Christianization of the OT, it is essential to point out that the Vulgate, especially in such parts as the Psalter, is a beautiful translation; one must not neglect to note the aesthetic values of the Latin Bible.

Where does Luther's Bible stand in all these respects? First of all, it will be readily granted that Luther's German version has fewer factual mistakes than the Vulgate. That is only as it should be, in view of the fact that it was made in the Age of Humanism. It may safely be said that it is a more faithful rendering than the Vulgate.

Second, the Luther Bible resembles the Vulgate in that it also gives far greater unity to the original than is historically accurate. In fact, Luther's translation, like his exegesis, is considerably more unifying than the Vulgate and the pre-Lutheran German Bibles based on the latter. As we observed earlier that the medieval concept of Christ is at the core of the Vulgate's unification of the Bible, we must now say that the Pauline and Lutheran view of Christ is the unifying element in Luther's German Bible.

While it would be an exaggeration to assume that each and every verse bears the imprint of Luther's personal religion—there are long narrative stretches where it would be difficult to perceive such a note—, we do find in many places unmistakable evidence of the influence of the religion of *sola fides*.

But we must differentiate clearly between artistic and religious emphases and considerations. Artistically speaking, the whole German Bible is Luther's very own, each verse partaking of the marked rhythmic patterns characteristic of his language. Religiously, the situation is naturally not so clear-cut; Luther's rendering is, after all, in many places and ways a straightforward translation.

In other words, Luther's exegesis is far more personal and unhistorical than his translation could be in the nature of the case. The surprising thing is rather that his translation should ever have been as expressive as it is of the deepest religious experiences and valuations of the man. If the Vulgate reflects the spiritualizing influence of Christianity, Luther's Bible mirrors in key passages (of which there are astonishingly many) the religious advance made by him over the post-Apostolic intellectual history of Christianity.

3. *Luther's Translation: Three Specimen Passages*

Assuming that the general literary value of the Lutheran Bible is so well known and widely recognized that specific examples are really superfluous, let us proceed at once to those passages that evince in translation—if indeed it is a question of translation—the definite stamp of Luther's religious individuality. To be more exact, the passages to be discussed here, though they are, of course, artistically pre-eminent (as indeed is true of practically all of Luther's Bible), reveal over and above this artistic superiority the distinctly Lutheran realm of intense religious fervor and highly personal religious value.

I propose to give three kinds of example. The first is a specimen of great literary beauty and exciting personal religiosity—Ps 73:25-26. The second is an OT specimen superbly illustrating the religion of "by faith alone"—Ps 90:7. The third is an example of Luther's ferreting out, as it were, the deepest meaning inherent in the Pauline original, but never before caught in any translation, Latin or German—Rom 3:28.

Ps 73:25-26

Whoever wishes to get an impression of the best that Luther could do in the way of a poetically creative rendering should consider his unequalled and incomparable version of Ps 73:25-26. The full measure of Luther's achievement can be appreciated only, I believe, if one follows the evolution of his translation of these two verses. The first rendering, while by no means slavishly literal, is still literal in a way. Yet it already has distinct literary value. This is how it reads in the first edition of Luther's German Psalter of 1524:

Wen hab ich ym hymel? und auff erden gefellet myr nichts, wenn ich bey dyr byn.

Meyn fleysch vnd meyn hertz ist verschmacht, Gott ist meyns hertzen hort, vnd meyn teyl ewiglich.

It is fair to say that this early Lutheran version is of the same general calibre as the English rendering found in the celebrated KJV:

Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.

My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

If Luther had not revised his first translation of this passage later on, he would still move on the impressive literary plane of the KJV. But Luther's remarkable revision in 1531 of what was a very good translation before is so amazing and breath-taking that it should receive the attention it so fully deserves:

Wenn ich nur dich hab, So frage ich nichts nach hymel vnd erden.

Wenn mir gleich leib und seel verschmacht, So bistu doch Gott allzeit meines hertzen trost, vnd mein teil.

There is no denying that this version approaches the high level of creative poetry, even though suggested by the Hebrew psalm. What interests us most in this connection is the real nature of Luther's accomplishment. This passage, probably as beautiful as any in the entire German Bible, is surely one of the finest examples of Luther's extraordinary ability to put into matchless words what stirred in his religiously ever-so-sensitive and profound soul. Going beyond the Hebrew poet, Luther's literary genius enabled him to find a modern garb of exquisite beauty and depth.

It should also be pointed out that in these two verses Luther, while intensifying the original, did not find it necessary to change or modify the underlying spirit. What this passage contains is a fervent devotion to God. This is as much Luther's concern as the original author's, actually more so it would seem. The principal idea of this passage, the soul's passionate yearning for its Lord and God, is common to all religious minds. Yet there are different levels of religious fervor and linguistic power. Martin Luther belongs to the choicest masters in both realms, combining in one

person, as it were, the depth of Augustine and Bernard and a literary skill greater than that of Jerome. The possession of both these qualities alone marks him as one of the great religious and artistic personalities of all time.

Ps 90:7

But there are other passages, generally unrecognized by a more casual reader of the German Bible, into which Luther saw fit to introduce certain changes, subtle more often than not, which reflect and express, directly or merely indirectly, his religion of *sola fides*. One such passage, combining both great literary beauty and religious depth, is Ps 90:7:

Das macht dein Zorn, dass wir so vergehen, und dein Grimm, dass wir so plötzlich dahin müssen.

Perhaps we can feel the strong individuality of Luther's version more easily if we contrast it with the comparatively literal KJV:

For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.

What Luther does to this passage is to throw out in the boldest relief possible his fundamental conviction that all our woe and sudden death are due to God's anger and wrath. This idea is by no means lacking in the original and in the KJV, but it is far from being expressed as strongly, even vehemently, as it is in Luther's powerful rendering. Thus a religious idea, not absent from the Hebrew original, is given such emphasis by Luther that it alters the literary structure of the verse.

While Luther should not, of course, be charged with having done violence to the spirit of the original, it can be stated without fear of contradiction that he has immeasurably intensified the religious ardor of the verse. What is breath-taking is Luther's rare ability to express verbally, with extraordinary urgency, what he had experienced in his inmost heart and thoughts. It was his well-nigh incredible achievement to raise the already high level of great passages to still higher, at times giddy, religious heights. This passage illustrates very well the inescapable fact that the German Bible is somehow Luther's very own. The greater the divine anger,

the greater divine grace. Only grace can consume anger. *Sola gratia, sola fides.*

Rom 3:28

The last passage I should like to discuss is one that has been attacked and defended more violently than any other in Luther's Bible: Rom 3:28. Luther himself, it will be recalled, defended it skillfully and, to my mind, convincingly in his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*. The familiar verse reads like this:

So halten wir denn dafür, dass der Mensch gerecht werde, allein durch den Glauben, ohne des Gesetzes Werke.

Luther's spirited argument that the genius of the German language calls for the word "allein" ("alone") is well-taken. What Luther, when rightly understood, succeeds in doing in this superbly rendered verse is to extract the deepest meaning from Paul's words and to find the most fitting and idiomatic German garb for the original. Martin Luther, having fully understood Paul's intent, probably better than anyone since these immortal words were first uttered, adequately caught the spirit of Paul's famous verse and rendered it ingeniously in another language.

It is of no small interest for a further vindication of the essential correctness of Luther's daring rendering, if that were indeed needed, that recent NT scholarship has pointed out that Paul uses the word *χωρίς* in this passage, meaning more than simply "without"—meaning namely, "apart from." It is only fair to say that Luther rendered poetically and imaginatively, with all the warmth and enthusiasm of a man stirred to his depths, what cool, prosaic, objective modern scholars translate dispassionately as "apart from." The spirit, however, is the same. Luther's rendition, it would seem, is as scientifically accurate as it is artistically and idiomatically matchless.

4. Conclusion

We have reached the end of our brief survey of Luther's exegetical and translational work on the Bible. It is safe to say, by way of conclusion, that Luther combines in one person the genius

of two of his most distinguished predecessors in these two fields, Jerome the translator and Augustine the exegete. One may hold that Luther excelled both these men in their respective endeavors. If we bear in mind that Jerome merely revised large sections of the *Itala*, leaving many passages almost unchanged, Luther's eminence stands out immediately; for his German Bible, despite a small measure of indebtedness to the German Bible tradition of the Middle Ages, is in every responsible sense an original translation, not just a revision, no matter how extensive or polished, of an already-existing basic text.

Augustine's high place among Christian exegetes is assured. It is he who was the primary authority for all medieval exegesis, which was so largely under his sway for many long centuries. Luther is in a profound sense the last exegete in the Augustinian tradition. But he surpassed his beloved predecessor in matters exegetical to the extent that his theology was profounder than that of the great African father. This ineluctable fact forces itself upon us by a comparison of Augustine's and Luther's interpretations of the psalms, for example. Luther represents the crowning achievement of the great epoch of Christian exegesis of the psalms beginning with Augustine and ending in the sixteenth century.

Finally, from the standpoint of Bible translation, Martin Luther was a creative Bible translator, who has given the world a transfigured, personalized, and individualized Bible in one of the important modern languages. In order to appreciate it fully, it is quite imperative to recognize in it the heritage of the Middle Ages. Although Luther's German Bible also points forward, to some extent, to the future in that it is scholarly, its most characteristic feature points to a great past, which it sums up. But it surpasses that past in a religious intensity crowned by the idea of *sola fides*. Thus, this literary and religious masterpiece stands at the end of the Middle Ages, as their very culmination.